

## **THE EUNUCHS AND WOMEN EXPLOITED BY THE ARABS, THE CHINESE AND THE CHOLAS**

**K.V. Ramakrishna Rao\***

### **Eunuchs, castration, production of transgenders by the Arabs and the Chinese**

Eunuch is a castrated man i.e., when a man's genital is removed by operation or otherwise at a singular time or continuous period, he becomes an eunuch. The Arabs called them as "Hijrahs" and "Zananas", whereas, the Chinese mentioned them "Neishi".<sup>1</sup> The Arabs / Mohammedans officially employed the Hijrahs / Zananas to take care of harems as they were castrated males, who could not exploit the females sexually, but were able to carry out all the domestic work.<sup>2</sup> They synthesized males by castrating Hijrahs at young age and as such, they were neither physically declared as males nor females, however acquiring behavior as expected by the trainer. They also targeted perverted males to join harem deliberately for earning as well as by transvesting their sex to satisfy their mental aberration of becoming a female. They also produced another set of perverted males who were called as *Zananas*, who

were basically males having intact male organs, but behave like females with their garments and habits and even they attracted males for sodomy. The Arabs and Mohammedans used both Hijrahs and *Zananas*, who were professionally working as catamites obeying their masters.

### **The Arabs and eunuchs**

The exploitation of eunuchs was found from the advent of Islam, up to the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the major centres of Islam in the East (Umayyads, Abbasids, Seljuks, Zengids, Ayyubids and Mamluks and to some extent, the Fatimids of Egypt). The power accumulated by the eunuchs, militarily, socially and even economically (especially as trustees of financial affairs and property) in the Islamic society had been significant. David Ayalon<sup>3</sup> finds a close ties connecting it to the harem, the eunuchs and the Mamlukus. He points out in all of these three areas, the dominant element had been slaves (Islamised

\* Independent Researcher, Supdt. of Central Excise, Director, Institute for the Study of Ancient Indian Arts and Sciences.

and often enfranchised) who were imported beyond the lands of Islam.

### The Chinese and eunuchs

The Chinese exploitation of eunuchs was found extensively during the Tang (618-907), Northern Song (960-1127), Southern Song (1127-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) periods. In fact, such exploitation is attributed for the downfall of these dynasties by the Chinese scholars and historians<sup>7</sup>.

Eunuchs were institutionalized in the Chinese royal life, just like the medieval Arabs and Mohammedans. As Chinese emperor was considered divine, only the eunuchs had privilege of entering into their personal chambers and bedrooms. In the China's dynastic history, the employment of eunuch at the Chinese royal courts ranged between 3,000 and 70,000 at various times reaching peak during the later Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

### The Indians and Eunuchs

In Indian tradition, there have been instances of eunuchs, but in the medieval period, there are hardly any instances of their existence, but for the Mohammedan intrusion as pointed out above. The eunuch culture perhaps starts with the invading Arabs transforming into established institution in the northern India during the Slave / Mamluk period (1250-1517). The Mohammedan invaders or the settled ones at Delhi used to have young, beautiful boys as companions in those days and they were invariably eunuchs. When they had grown up with vigour and strength, they became body guards, leaders and commanders. The Arabic and Persian poetry was always enamored with the handsome boys and beautiful eunuchs. The Sultans had favourite eunuchs to attend to all their wants. Incidentally, in Iran and north India, during this period erotic literature was produced

**The Cholas and women:** The Cholas employed women in their empire for different purposes and there is no direct evidence that they used eunuchs for any purpose like their counterparts Chinese or Arabs. During Rajaraja reign (985-1014) and Rajendra (1012-1044), women

were used for temple services, as could be noted from the inscriptions. They were known as "Taliccherip pendir" (தலிச்செரிப் பெண்டீர்) i.e, women living in quarters situated near the temple (Tali = temple<sup>24</sup> ceri = living together). Though the inscriptions do not explain the nature of services provided by these women, the later-day Pandya inscriptions point out that they were known as "Tevaradiyargal" (தெவரடியார்கள்) and providing the following services<sup>5</sup>:

1. Tiruvalagitthal (திருவலகிட்டல்) - doing decoration work
2. Tirumezhugiduthal (திருமேழுகிட்டல்) cleaning temple with liquids, colloidal substances
3. Taligai vilakkuthal (தலிகை விளக்குதல்) - cleaning temples
4. Amudhupadikku arisi kazhuvuthal (அமுதுபாங்கு அரிசி கழுவுதல்)- cleaning rice for preparing food.

In fact, the Tiruvotriyur inscription details that the following categories of women provide the specific services as follows:

1	Tevaradiyiar (தெவரடியார்கள்)	Airing with "White Fan" (Vensamaram) to God
2	Pathiyilar (பதியிலர்)	Airing with "White Fan" to God at a specified time, had expertise in the "Cokkam" type of dance, used to sing when Itchapatali women dance.
3	Itchapataliyar (இட்சபாந்த தொன்மீனர்)	Perform dance and sing exclusively

He reportedly brought 400 women from different parts of Cholamandalam and made to reside near the Big Temple. Inscriptional evidences prove that not only women, but also men were brought. These women and men also were found in Ceris but also in places known as "Velam" (வெலம் - காவல் புறப்பட்ட பகுதி, protected place). Not only for temple maintenance, but also for construction works, where naturally thousands of men and women must have been used, as many temples were built during the Chola period. Either, they must

have been already experts in their respective profession untrained. Therefore, the expression 'velam' cannot be construed to like harem, zanana and nei-shi, as some modern scholars tried to suggest.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the negative or bad connotation of these words arose during the modern period, many times, with the forceful and forced understanding equating the temple-women with regular prostitutes.

Whether eunuchs were employed by the Arabs and the Chinese to eliminate Cholas? K. A. Nilakanta Sastri has already pointed out about the existence of slavery,<sup>8</sup> particularly women bought and sold for economic reasons viz., poverty<sup>9</sup>. However, there is no evidence that they were used for prostitution. Similarly, the castration was not practiced till the advent of the Mohammedans, but not in South India. Therefore, the practice of exploiting eunuchs for entertainment or sodomy is ruled out. However, during the 250 years (from Rajaraja to Kulottunga) as the naval expeditions had been frequent with the participation of all the three groups Indians / Cholas, Arabs / Mohammedans and Chinese / Songs, during such cross-cultural actions and interactions, eunuchs played damaging role that could be inferred from the consequences. The offer of eunuchs to the officials of the Chola embassies who came to meet the Chinese emperors has already been pointed out. Had the mention of Chau ju-Kau to be taken as truth, the Malabar / Chera King was already under the grip of foreign women-bodyguards, that too specifically "chosen for their fine physique", as recorded by him. Naturally, such strong and well-built physique bodied "women" should have been eunuchs. As China city and Arab settlements were there already, the eunuch attack on the Cholas must have been so easy. Thus, in spite of "Kantalur kalamaruttal" activities, the eunuchs methodology would have worked well in the Chola country.

The mysterious deaths of Chola envoys in China: Soli San-wan was Rajaraja's Vice-Minister who proceeded to Guangzhou, China in 1015 CE on diplomatic embassy heading 52 members mission. Travelling for 1150 days, they reached Guangzhou to meet the Song emperor. The presentation ceremony was held in Kaifeng, the ten capital of Guangzhou on

October 15, 1015. After the mission, when they were returning in 1016, San-wan died mysteriously in Xiangyi, in Sui county of Henan province on the Grand canal. Hraprasad Ray noted.<sup>10</sup> "What happened to his entourage was not known", adding, "Had this envoy returned to India he would have left some account of contemporary China and Sino-Indian relations". In 1020, Rajendra sent Pa-lan-de-malie-di to offer tribute, but he died of an illness on his arrival at Guangzhou.<sup>11</sup> However, the others were sent back with banquets and rich presents. Here also the reason for death is not known, as the translators have not given. Here, it has to be noted that some translators, though giving the first death, the second one is not mentioned. Therefore, the mysterious deaths of the ambassadors of the Cholas in China raise critical questions:

1. Whether the Heads of the Chola embassy / trade missions died naturally?
2. Or were they killed by the Chinese to send a warning to the Cholas, as they wanted to dominate the SEA areas.
3. They were killed by the entertaining eunuchs, but mentioned as so suppressing the facts.
4. The reaction the Chola Emperors is not known.
5. When Rajaraja could punish the Chera King, Rajendra could proceed to Srivijaya to teach a lesson, could they kept quiet and continued to send missions with tributes to the Chinese emperors?
6. Or Rajendra invaded China also, thus, in turn, the Chinese and the Arabs planned to attack the Cholas?
7. The above hypothesis could perhaps answer the sudden fall of both Song and Chola empires reducing their power considerably in their respective counties.
8. The Cholas settlements in Quanzhou and the Chinese settlements in Nagapattinam and Calicut destroyed / disappeared.

These questions are raised considering the role of eunuchs played in the Chinese and SEA context committing atrocious acts of crimes and violences.<sup>12</sup> When they could bring downfall to Ming and Tan dynasties inflicting sorrow on the Song women making the dark period for them, they could have very well played such role in the affairs of the Cholas. As the

Chinese interpreters were required, just like other SEA countries, the Chinese could have resorted to the sendees of "Chinese barbarian officials"<sup>13</sup> who might have undermined the Cholas. The Buddhist role is also suspected, in spite of the grants extended to them in Nagapattinam.

#### **Number of Wives had by the Chola Kings (846-1270):**

The number of wives had by the later Chola dynasty is culled from the different sources as follows<sup>14</sup>:

Name the chola King / emperor	Period of reign	Wives	Son (s)	Daughters (s)
Vijayalayan	846-881	1	1	-
Aditya Cholan	871-907	2	2	-
Paranthagan	907-953	10	4	2
Kandaradityan	950-957	1	2	-
Arinjaya	956-957	4	1	-
Paranthagan - II / Sundara Cholan	957-970	2	2	1
Uttama Cholan	970-985	5		
Rajarajan - I	985-1014	10	1	1
Rajendran - I	1012-1044	5	7	2
Rajadhirajan - I	1018-1054	2		
Rajadhirajan - II	1051-1065	2	6	-
Vijayarajendran	1063-1070	2	2	1
Kulottungan - I	1070-1120	7	7	
Vikrama	1118-1136	3	1	
Kuluttungan - II	1133-1150	1		
Kuluttungan - III	1178-1218	1	1	
Rajaraja - III	1216-1256	1	1	
Rajendra - III	1246-1279	2		

**Note:** Wherever data is not available either "-" or blank is shown. But that does not mean that they had no son (s) or daughter (s), as we find Cholas marrying off daughters to Lankan king also and offering one to the Chinese emperor!.

Among the Cholas, incidentally, Rajarajan - I had 10 wives, next Kulottungan-I - 7 and others had less than 5, 4, 3 and many one. Moreover, the kings had more wives due to settlement of battle / war and thus both the victor and defeated to become relatives through marriage. Such marital bondages developed by the Cholas could be seen even in their maritime and martial activities. However, there are no evidences that they had concubines and other women. In royal palaces, there were women attending to the kings. However, there were no eunuchs or other

women as used by the Arabs and the Chinese, that too used for espionage, industrial spying and other subversive and terror activities.

#### **Conclusion**

The subject matter dealt with has been mosaic and complicated one involving many interconnected issues and therefore, analyzing in the context, the following conclusions are arrived at:

1. During the 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> period, the competitive powers of South Asia - the Cholas, the Arabs and the Chinese exploited women for production of goods and services in their respective ruled states or the protected domains and settlements.
2. The Arabs were only trading the goods of the Persia known as "Arab goods" and thus, they were not having any production centres. Oversea activities, long-time separation from the families, overstaying in other countries and similar exigencies could have necessitated them to have more wives or eunuchs attended to them for various purposes, such practice was institutionalized and approved with religious zeal and seal.
3. The Chinese too practiced such custom resulting in the rise and fall of the dynasties because of the traditional philosophy and moral values respected and followed. Here Confucianized Buddhism, Sinicized Buddhism, Confucianism and lastly Confucianized Islam played a role.<sup>15</sup>
4. While the production of goods and services in the context of the Cholas was linked with the temple-building activities, the maneuvers of the other two groups were restricted to production of goods and services, of course, accompanied with piracy, slavery and connected unethical business practices.
5. As the traditional Indian-Cholas and the Chinese were controlled by the dominant religions Hindu and Buddhist, the competing Arabs were by the newly founded Mohammedan religion in social and economic matters.
6. "Hundreds" or "Thousands" of women attending to "Chola prince" on daily basis as noted by Chau Ju-Kau or interpreted by the researchers by changing 3000 into 10,000 and 3,000 figures do not make them to at par with the Arabs and the Chinese

in the exploitation of women and eunuchs having departments and directorates.

7. Thus, the Cholas were engaging women in and around temples and royal palaces, the Chinese exploiting women and eunuchs (perhaps only males castrated) as explained above and the Arabs / Mohammedans utilized women and eunuchs (both male and female castrated) maximum.

8. In the globalization, liberalization and privatization context of the medieval period, the Cholas utterly failed in extending permissions liberally to the foreign companies to set up factories or settlements for trade at Nagapattinam, Kozhikode/Calicut, when they were eliminated from the foreign lands from carrying out trade and business. Here, the Arabs/Mohammedans and Cholas have evidently connived with each other to act against the Cholas.

9. Mysterious death of Cholas ambassadors in the Quanzhou region, entertainment of one ambassador with eunuch, piracy, slavery (involving women and

eunuchs), "tributary missions", connivance of Srivijayans and Cheras with the Chinese and Arabs etc., prove that the Cholas were betrayed by the Chinese and the Arabs.

10. As the Cholas empire during the material period excelled in many aspects like decentralization, standardized land survey, taxation, systematized judicial appointments, demarcation of the state into division, sub-division, democratic voting system, irrigation and agricultural development, exports and imports etc., when such democratic polity or decentralized governance was never thought of anywhere in the world till 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under such circumstances, exclusive criticism, select interpretation and biased historiography against Cholas for their exploitation of social, economic and political factors may not give complete picture. Therefore, impartial, critical and further study is required to find out more facts, so that the history of Cholas could be written in right perspective.

#### Notes & References

1. Interestingly, the Chinese expressions "nei shi" and "wai shi" resemble "agam" and "puram" concepts of the ancient Tamils and the scholars dealing with "nei shi" and "wais hi" translate them as inner affairs and outer affairs.
2. The Mohammedan harems were called Zanana, Zanana Khana and so on. Eunuchs were thus appointed as security guards to the harems and the senior eunuchs were known as Khwaja Sara or Nazirs. K.S.Lai, *The Moghul Harem*. Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi, 1988, p.56. Whether the Chinese *Neishi* has anything to do with *Nazir* or otherwise is not known, though both are expressions used for eunuchs in the Arabic and Chinese respectively.
3. David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*.
4. *Sirupanatrappadai*.63:3.
5. *South Indian Temple Inscriptions*, Vol.1, 212 of 1912, No.525, pp.511-513.
6. The Expression Velam, if formed vel + am, then it could denote the place that is lovable or where the Velir clan resides or the place of Murugan, as the word vel has the following meanings, as per *Pre-Pallavan Tamil Index*, by N. Subramanian.
7. Daud Ali, "The Service retinues of the Chola court: a Study of the term Velam in Tamil
- Inscriptions". *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol.70, 2007, pp.487-509.
8. K.A.Nilakanta Sastri, *Cholas*, University of Madras, 1984, pp.555-559.
9. *Ibid.*, p.564.
10. Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Trade Routes between India and China, c.lao B.C.-A.D. 1500*, Kolkatta, Progressive, 2003, pp.241-243.
11. Noboru Karashima and Tansen Sen, *Op.cit.*, p.299.
12. M. David Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Sons of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China*. University of Hawaii's Press, USA, 2001.
13. Hok-Lam Chan, The "Chinese Barbarian officials" in the Foreign Tributary Missions to China during the Ming dynasty, pp.411-416.
14. T.V. Sadhasiva Pandarattar, *Pirkala Chozhar Sarithiram, Later Cholas History*, Vol. I, 1958 and II 1957, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, India. The Chronology in the table, the followed as per theses two References.
15. Tan Tan Sen, Desheng Chen, Cheng Ho and *Islam in South East Asia*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2009, pp.10-11.